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ABSTRACT

This booklet presents excerpts from a discussion by a panel of educators and policymakers brought together by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), an organization that addresses human development needs through education, communication, and information. Participants shared their experiences in creating opportunities and procedures which could increase the participation and involvement of the family and community in the education of children. The purpose of the discussion was to link the knowledge gleaned from work with disadvantaged student populations in the United States with the problems and solutions dealt with in international work in developing nations. The excerpts are arranged according to speaker and organization. Following an introduction by Sharon L. Franz of AED, participants in the program included: Sandra B. Jibrell (Annie E. Casey Foundation), moderator; and panelists Gayle Dorman (Lilly Endowment, Inc.); Samuel Rea (U.S. Agency for International Development); J. William Rioux (National Committee for Citizens in Education); Rafael Valdivieso (AED); and Adriaan Verspoor (World Bank). (LL)

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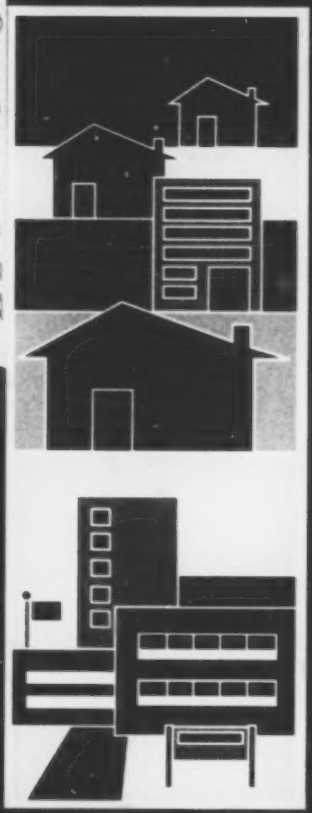

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The Family and the Community

Strengthening Education Reform

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AED
ACADEMY FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Academy for Educational Development (AED) is an independent, nonprofit organization that addresses human development needs through education, communication, and information. Under grants and contracts, AED operates programs for government and international agencies, educational institutions, foundations, and corporations. Since its founding in 1961, AED has conducted projects throughout the United States and in more than 100 countries in the developing world.

In partnership with its clients, AED seeks to increase access to learning, transfer skills and technology, and support institutional development.

30TH ANNIVERSARY SEMINAR SERIES

Strengthening Education Reform

The Family and the Community

Introduction:

Sharon L. Franz

Moderator:

Sandra B. Jibrell

Panelists:

Gayle Dorman
Samuel Rea
J. William Rioux
Rafael Valdivieso
Adriaan Verspoor

Conclusions

October 1991

These remarks are extracted from presentations made at a panel discussion held at AED on June 5, 1991 as part of its 30th Anniversary celebration.

AED

ACADEMY FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Sharon L. Franz

Academy for Educational Development

Sharon Franz is Senior Vice President and Director of Education and Exchange Programs at AED, with responsibility for international basic education, United States public education, and visitor exchange programs. She has participated in and managed an array of school reform projects, both in the United States and in developing nations, focused on ways to make schools more responsive to the needs of students and the communities they serve.

As families and communities all over the world face the challenge of providing a sound and relevant education for their children, educators and policymakers are confronting difficult political, economic, and academic choices related to education reform. In celebration of its 30th Anniversary of work in educational improvement, the Academy for Educational Development invited a panel of distinguished educators and policymakers to discuss the changing roles of the family and the community both in the United States and in developing countries.

The panelists were invited to share their own experiences in creating opportunities and procedures which could increase the participation and involvement of the family and community in the education of their children. The panelists also were asked to situate their comments in the context of rapidly shifting institutional and structural changes where, increasingly, people are demanding more involvement in the decisions which affect their lives.

As we had hoped, the panel provided us with an array of perspectives on the various ways in which the family and the community can participate more fully in improving the quality of their children's education — from helping students with homework to increasing the resources available to their own schools, either through public or private sources. Of particular interest are

the similarities between the United States, with its tradition of local control and decentralized schooling, and many developing countries with highly centralized bureaucracies and decision-making. In both settings, policymakers and practitioners are seeking to redirect resources and discover innovative ways to move critical decisions closer to the people who are most immediately affected by the school's failure or success.

On behalf of the Academy Board, Officers, and staff, I want to extend our appreciation to the panelists for not only their time and energy, but their thoughtful contributions to a critical education issue which will challenge us all through the next decade.

Moderator

Sandra B. Jibrell

Annie E. Casey Foundation

Sandra Jibrell, former Senior Program Officer at AED, is currently a Program Officer at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Her career in U.S. education has focused on issues concerned with the relationship between education and youth employment, including service at the National Governors' Association and Youthwork, Inc.

This discussion aims to link the knowledge gleaned from our work with disadvantaged student populations in the United States with the problems and solutions that we are dealing with in our international work in developing nations. In this country, the educational reform of the 1980s focused on raising standards — both for graduating from high school and for becoming a teacher. It became apparent that this was not enough, that we really needed to rethink the structure of individual schools and how those schools respond to their students and their communities. This has been the second wave of reform. The dimensions of these changes — and their impact upon the link between schools and families — lead us to today's discussion. Internationally, some of the same dynamics are at work, and our panelists will draw the links for us.

Gayle Dorman

Lilly Endowment, Inc.

Gayle Dorman is program director for education with the Lilly Endowment, Inc., an Indiana-based philanthropic foundation committed to expanding opportunities for educational institutions and youth-serving organizations to reform and renew their approaches to meeting the needs of young people. Formerly, she served as director for education and program development for the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Not to downplay the importance of politics and governance, but I would like to begin by raising the importance of the informal roles parents and other family members fulfill directly with their children. Strengthening these roles is as important as reforming institutions and policies and possibly is a prerequisite. I think there are three reasons why it is important to think about the informal roles of the family, why the delegation of certain responsibilities to the schools is not working, and why we need to work our way out of this dilemma.

First, these informal roles are inherently valuable. They make a tremendous difference in children's learning, both before children enter school and upon entry to school. Reading to their children, helping them with homework, engaging in learning activities, communicating to children about the value of education — these are things parents and other family members do which make a tremendous difference in children's lives and in their learning. By doing them, families make a claim over their children, and this is healthy.

Second, unless schools value and support such informal roles, they are unlikely to view parents as people who can play meaningful and helpful roles in school governance and organizational issues. The discussion I hear among educators is that parents do not value education or schools, even that they do not

care about their kids. Somehow, they say, we need to fix these parents. As long as this attitude prevails in schools, efforts to engage parents in the life of schools will draw in only a few *good* parents and will not be representative or have a sense of equity about who schools reach out to for involvement in governance issues. If I am an educator, do I really want parents who don't care about their kids and who don't care about education, as I see them, mucking around in my school? Consciously or unconsciously, the answer will be, *No*. One way to break this mindset is for educators to see parents engaged in activities supporting their children's learning, many of which may be done at home. For many minority and poor parents, especially, there needs to be a new level of trust and respect between them and the schools, beginning with supporting what is foremost in their minds and hearts, helping their kids. Community organizations, such as churches and youth serving organizations, also can work with parents on these roles.

> *Strengthening informal family relationships that support children's learning is equally important to reforming institutions and policies and may be . . . a prerequisite.*

Third, there is an apparent discrepancy between what parents value and desire for their children and what the public perceives as parents' attitudes. An Indiana poll corroborates what I see in national surveys, that as many as 90 percent of parents expect and want their children to go on to postsecondary education, but the public generally believes parents do not value education. What I wonder is — if the

public truly believes those who benefit most from tax support of public schooling are not fulfilling their basic responsibilities, then how does this influence the public's willingness to support the schools? We could not find any research on this, so the Lilly Endowment is funding its own. If it turns out that this discrepancy does exist, then we may have the makings of a need for a marketing campaign around education and children's learning.

So, I see not only inherent values in the informal roles families play in educating their children, but also a connection between an understanding of these informal roles and public perceptions about schools. These are part of the political and organizational aspects of the issue of decentralization in education.

Samuel Rea

U.S. Agency for International Development

Samuel Rea is director of the Office of Education of the U.S. Agency for International Development (A.I.D.). In this capacity, he provides leadership for U.S. foreign assistance to education and human resources initiatives in developing nations. His 24-year career with A.I.D. includes substantial experience related to Africa, both as a program and human resources development officer in Washington, D.C., and in Botswana, Madagascar, Senegal, and Tanzania.

Educators overseas have been talking for some time about decentralization. The terms and the issues are well understood. For example, five years ago AED held an excellent seminar for A.I.D.'s Latin America Bureau on decentralization in education in that region. Recently, Sheldon Shaefer of the International Development Research Centre in Canada sent us an outline for what he calls *Collaborating for Educational Change*. Working with the International Institute for Educational Planning in Paris, Shaefer plans to use this curriculum for regional workshops as a way of strengthening the support of families and communities for primary schools.

However, we do not have very many examples of what works. The Agency for International Development has started many projects, especially in Africa, but we really have not had a chance to evaluate how effective they are. So, I will not limit myself to what A.I.D. is doing but look at what the research literature shows.

The one clear example we have in Latin America is the Escuela Nueva Program, started in Colombia in 1968. This model grew from work on mastery learning and multi-class schools and has been adapted by 18,000 of the 24,000 primary schools in

Colombia. The model is spreading to Costa Rica and other countries. The Escuela Nueva Program depends largely on community and parent support, involving parents in actual teaching as classroom aides.

Turning to south Asia, a regional conference leading up to the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 revealed a tremendous dissatisfaction with the formal school system throughout the region. Not only are a significant number of children not enrolled in schools, but the school systems are not conveying culture to the students who are there. Parents feel the school systems are not balancing modern learning of the basics with a transmission of culture. In Thailand, a strong tradition of education grew from the schools that were part of palaces and Buddhist temples and homes. A school education committee system, established in 1975, specifically sets objectives to expand school services to the communities, including academic, occupational, cultural, recreational, and informational ways. Principals are being trained to deal with communities in the same way as they are being trained as better managers of the schools themselves. Community people are being trained to see the school as an agent of their community and not of the government. Schools are envisioned as centers for community development by providing information through radio

> *We are searching for not just better support for schools as they are but at the same time for a better school system which parents can wholeheartedly support.*

broadcasting (e.g., consumer price information), occupational and vocational training, and nutrition and health immunization programs. There also is a coordinating unit for cultural conservation, which may involve schools in local festivals, for example. The plan adopted in Thailand is working toward the school, the temple and the home functioning as a unit.

Sri Lanka, according to a 1989 A.I.D. study by Mary Anderson, is described as an outstanding example of efforts to promote strong relationships between schools and communities. Starting with the parents' charter in 1979, there has been a long-standing concern in the ministry of education for the rights and duties of the parents with respect to the schools. The study, conducted by the Basic Research and Implementation of Developing Education Systems (BRIDGES) project, drew three conclusions. One, most schools do give and receive support, depending on the community's expectations of the future returns from education. Muslim communities in this respect are more helpful than other ethnic groups. Two, non-formal education programs have a very positive effect on improving school-community relations and enhancing the community's attachments to the schools. Three, principals play the crucial role. Their personalities and abilities to be non-political, as much as anything else, influence the communities to greater support of the school systems.

However, the most encouraging example is in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) began in 1972 as a community-empowerment initiative, working especially on health, employment, and adult literacy. In 1991, there are 3,700 villages involved in this grassroots movement. In the mid-1980s, parents who had become more self-reliant through credit groups and creating employment, began to ask, 'but what of our children?' The formal school system had failed them notoriously in the sense that only 50 percent of the children in Bangladesh were enrolled in schools; of those, more than 60 percent dropped out

after three years. BRAC began to experiment with school-equivalent programs for children who had never been to school or who had dropped out after one year. Students between the ages of eight and 10 attended classes in the village on language, health, and social sciences — all taught with examples which were extremely relevant to the village. The teacher usually was a parent especially trained for this role. The results of the BRAC program are unbelievable. The attendance is 95 percent; only 1.5 percent are dropping out. A large percent of those who leave the program after three years go into the formal school system at the fourth-grade level. BRAC is now experimenting with a program called Primary Education for Older Children. Aimed at 11- to 14-year-olds, it is presenting the same material given to the younger group. Seventy percent of these students are girls who have never been in school before. The older group covers the material in one-half of the time, and 40 percent of them enter formal schooling at the fourth grade.

The BRAC successes inform us about some of the preconditions needed in order to use the family and community to improve the performance of primary schools. One is the overwhelming support of parents before the school initiatives were started. Second, the BRAC program had created an extensive support system, including personnel services, accounting departments and logistics offices throughout the country. This system enabled the school equivalent program to get off to a fast start.

In summary, we see a strong connection between nonformal education and employment generation and a new school approach. But most significantly, we see a search for not only better support for schools as they are but also for a better school system which parents can wholeheartedly support. That's quite a different thing from just saying, 'Let's encourage parents and communities to support the schools as they are.' A transformation of the system itself is going on.

J. William Rioux

National Committee for Citizens in Education

J. William Rioux is the executive director of the National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE), which he co-founded in 1973 to help strengthen the roles of both parents and citizens in public education. He has published extensively on the importance of school-parent partnerships in school reform. Most recently, his work on parental involvement in dropout prevention led to NCCE's With and For Parents initiative.

In its 18 years, the National Committee for Citizens in Education has done many things, but in the next few minutes I want to talk about one particular experience, our three and one-half years of working with a Baltimore community of 150 African-American families. But before I do that, I want to set the scene with a few statistics. One, only 25 percent of the households in the United States have children in the public schools. That's a statistic which haunts me — I think of all those people who could be helping to make schools better but who are not connected. Second, in the 47 urban school systems belonging to the Council of the Great City Schools, 75 percent of the enrollment are children from minority populations. Third, if you accept the statistic that 30 percent of the public school enrollment is "at risk," then we are talking about a very significant number of children, at least 12 to 13 million. Because of my own experiences and commitments going back many years, I believe school decentralization reforms are most urgent for the least empowered, those reflected in these statistics.

Our Baltimore families were not empowered. In the middle of 1987, we selected 150 students of an incoming 600-student sixth grade class at an inner city middle school. We selected students, but our goal all along was to work with their parents through the three middle grades to the beginning of their

child's high school years. We wanted to understand these parents' daily lives in great detail and relate that understanding to their involvement, or lack of it, in their children's education. So, we opened a storefront building in the community and were there as part of the community, not as outsiders. We were looking for ways to help the parents become more effective advocates for their children and, in the long run, improve their children's achievement.

I want to mention a few conclusions from our experience:

First, our focal point was on parents; within six months we had shifted to a focus on families and households. Whoever was in the household is whom we worked with, even though a parent is one thing, a family another, and an entire household quite another proposition. But we had to move with the situation.

Second, as experienced as some of us were in being able to become part of the community, we underestimated what these West Baltimore families confront. About a half-year into the project, we were encountering serious problems in making sustained contacts with the parents, even though we had two staff workers on the streets, pounding on doors, meeting people in laundromats and corner stores. We decided to take a random sample of the problems faced by these families — and it was sobering.

Third, focusing parental involvement on school reform or the improvement of a child's achievement in school is likely to fail because it is too narrow. Such an approach sends a sort of silent message to low-income parents — that you misunderstand the difficulties of their lives. The goals of educators or policymakers have to be attentive to all the other things that parents encounter. If we are really serious about reform, we must undertake more than in the past and do more difficult work. Educators have held

a *bunker* mentality; they remained in the school building. To be fair, parents also had a *bunker* mentality about being somewhere more than a few hours or meeting in certain places. The parents were cautious and cynical about school reform; they have seen too many efforts resulting in no change or in making things worse. This makes me question the excitement about school choice for low-income, minority parents. We found little potential for mobilizing a community around school improvement or parent involvement issues. The community was too fragmented and enfeebled. I had counted on a sense of community and neighborhood in this attendance area that we could work with and strengthen in order to bring greater resources to the parents. That did not turn out to be the case. Although there are many organizations in that community, they are in difficulty financially and they sometimes are at war with one another, politically and programmatically.

> *An approach to families about parental involvement or school restructuring . . . which is as narrow as school reform or the improvement of your child's achievement in school is likely to fail because it is too narrow. It sends sort of a silent message that you misunderstand the difficulties of the life being lived.*

Fourth, if we are serious about drawing low-income, minority parents into a school decentralization and reform move-

ment, we have a long way to go. And new and difficult things to do to make it come about. Our priority is education. They understand that and are committed to it, but it keeps getting bumped down lower on the list, behind medical problems, housing, and inadequate food. If we were in their situation, the same thing would occur. We might want to keep education at the forefront, but we wouldn't be able to.

In summary, it will not be easy to successfully draw low-income, minority families into our reform movement. One option worth exploring, in order to have a better chance at real reform, is to create schools anew, such as with charter schools, where we would have a relatively clean slate.

Rafael Valdivieso

Academy for Educational Development

Rafael Valdivieso, Vice President and Director of School and Community Services, provides leadership to a broad range of AED programs focused on disadvantaged youth. He also serves as a member of the Resource Group for Goal Two — high school completion — of the U.S. National Education Goals Panel. Previously, he served as vice president for programs and research at the Hispanic Policy Development Project.

Even before the current reform movement, back in the 1960s, we believed that parent involvement worked. When I say *we*, I am talking about people who were outside of the school system, but in many ways we did not know how to achieve this. Almost all of the programs included parent involvement, especially Head Start. At that time, even Head Start was out of the mainstream of the education system. The mandated parent involvement components, however, were the weakest part of the old Head Start programs because we really did not know how to do some of this work. We had a term — Maximum Feasible Participation (MFP) — that was actually a slogan, meant to involve people in the most feasible maximum way. We thought that by having a slogan and trying to open up the doors, these things would happen.

In the 1990s, we are again talking about family and community and school partnerships, but this time we know the programs work. We have research, by Joyce Epstein, James Comer, Hank Levin, the Institute for Responsive Education, the Hispanic Policy Development Project, and others. In our own work by the Project, we set up a commission in 1982 to look at Hispanic schooling in five school systems. In Chicago, we sent out five or six teams to talk to parents, each with a Spanish-speaking commissioner and an English-speaking community person. But one team was set up mistakenly, a business person

and a school person, neither of whom spoke Spanish. They met in a roomful of parents, none of whom spoke English, but when interpreters arrived they learned how the parents felt insulted when they went to school and how they believed school people were reacting against them because of class differences. This business person had been hardnosed before, always asking why extra programs were needed. After that meeting, every time he talked to a principal, he would ask, 'Have you had a meeting with the parents and conducted it in Spanish?'

We have a convergence of views politically that support the idea of school-parent partnerships.

I tell this story because so often some people don't care because they haven't really made the effort to go out there and find out. Now that we know parent-school partnerships work, we have begun to dare to ask if the partnerships actually can influence school reform. In my view, it is hard now to imagine how you could change a school without involving parents.

In addition to research and successful programs, there is a confluence on the subject of family involvement from different perspectives. Conservatives see children who lack support and are saying that ways are needed to involve parents. Liberals call for parenting for these same kids. Unlike the 1960s, we do now have a convergence of political views supporting the idea of school-parent partnerships.

There is still an even wider context for what is happening. Business in this country has been going through a period of

Back in the 1960s we used to believe that parent involvement worked . . . but in many ways we didn't know how to achieve this.

restructuring. Because of changes in the world market, there has been a discontent with mass production, a belief that it is not working. Education is being seen as a mass production system whose *product* needs to be much, much better. As in business, education is knocking out middle layers of bureaucracy and looking to restructuring schools, one by one. And, as in business, communications and technology will be a part of how we do that.

We seem to know better where we are going. We even have a new center — on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, a federally funded center with Joyce Epstein and Don Davies as co-directors. We certainly have come a long way, from being on the margins back in the 1960s to being much more the mainstay of what is happening. Because of the larger forces in our society and in our economy, in the 1990s we are going to see much more attention to families and their role in restructuring schools.

Adriaan Verspoor

The World Bank

Adriaan Verspoor is the Chief of the Education and Employment Division of the World Bank. Prior to joining the Bank in 1976, he served in Africa for UNESCO and UNICEF. He has published extensively on educational planning and management, emphasizing how to bridge the gap between management theory and education practice. Most recently, he co-authored a well-regarded study for the World Bank — Improving Primary Education in Developing Countries: A Review of Policy Options.

The underlying idea about family and community education is that they can work only to the extent education systems have decentralized their decisionmaking authority. I tend to look at this issue from its management and planning perspective, as well as what works, not just what is good, or right or wrong. A careful reading of the admittedly limited research literature on decentralized decisionmaking in education leads me to several propositions, including:

First, the key determinant of successful school improvements is that they fit with specific local conditions. This finding is well-grounded in research in the United States, UNESCO, and my own work at the World Bank. It is an important finding and creates, of course, problems for education planners and administrators who love to manage uniform systems, with simple logistics and control of performance. The research tells us there is considerable merit to diversity and that mobilizing community support for schooling requires taking into account parents' priorities and prejudices.

Second, The most effective schools are those with strong principals and broad community support. This evidence is overwhelming in developing countries, particularly the anecdotal evidence. What remains striking, in the face of this evidence, is

the almost general absence of rational selection of principals and of principal training, in general. What training that does occur mostly emphasizes administrative procedures. I am astonished at the lack of systematic efforts to support principal training.

Third, Effective schools rarely will develop in the absence of supporting social programs. We are learning at the World Bank that the effectiveness of schooling is strongly influenced by the health, physical and mental, of children, and particularly their nutritional status. Schools cannot or, at best, only at considerable cost, make up for the damage to the cognitive ability in children during their preschool years. Basic education is most effective when delivered as part of a package of essential social services focused on pregnant women, mothers and preschool children. At the World Bank we recently have become much more concerned about integrating our health, population, nutrition and education operations. We still have a lot of learning to do.

Fourth, sustained local efforts must be complemented by central action. I think this is where my European perspective on these things can come out. Few communities, and certainly not disadvantaged ones, can launch and sustain school development programs by themselves, even if empowered to do so. In the United States, research shows that successful implementation of innovations comes about because of a combination of central pressure and professional support. The

The challenge is to provide strong leadership and allow for local diversity and professional support — without stiffling local initiative.

same is true in developing countries. If the minister of education and his senior officials are lukewarm, chances are that local officials will not be terribly enthusiastic about school improvement. You must be careful to not equate central leadership with central control. The challenge is to provide strong leadership and allow for local diversity and professional support, without stifling local initiative. In a few World Bank projects, for example, we are using school improvement funds for school-specific initiatives designed by headmasters and PTAs.

Fifth, Effective school improvements require a reallocation of resources from the rich to the poor by the central authority. Decentralized decisionmaking cannot just imply decentralized resources. That would result in severe inequities, with the poorest communities ending up with the poorest schools. Even systems that allocate resources centrally on a uniform basis create important de facto inequities. The standard formulas for teachers or the number of books per child in Zimbabwe, for example, might seem to produce the same resources. In fact, it doesn't quite work that way. The best qualified teachers serve in the best schools where middleclass parents are ready and able to supplement central resource allocations. Realizing national objectives for quality improvement cannot be realized without improving the worst schools. They usually are located in the poorest communities. Making them effective and efficient will require significant investments which the resource base of these communities rarely can support. I would argue that the situation in the United States is not dissimilar in this respect.

I would say the central question is not whether decentralization is desirable or not. Management theory tells us that decisions are best taken as low as possible in the hierarchy. In almost all countries, however, education management and decisionmaking are much more centralized than the technology of the education enterprise demands. We need to ask three questions.

How far can decentralization be pushed, given equity goals and the capacity of local institutions? What are the specifications of the centrally defined framework of educational objectives, such as increasing access and participation or setting quality standards? How can central financing mechanisms be designed to encourage local initiative and responsibility for school improvement and, at the same time, establish means for accountability?

The only lesson that comes out of the international experience of twenty to thirty years is that school improvement is a process that takes place one step at a time, one school at a time.

I don't have the answers to these questions, but I think one has to ask them and reflect on them every time one goes into a country to make recommendations about decentralization.

Conclusions

It is apparent to the most casual reader that identifying the role of the family and community in a rapidly changing educational system is both complex and complicated. A number of interventions are suggested, but in the final analysis, it becomes obvious that just as the issues are diverse, so too are the remedies. Flexibility and creativity must be guiding principles for future educational change.

For over 30 years, the Academy for Educational Development has been assisting educational institutions in the United States and in the developing world to establish policies, practices, and procedures to make them more relevant and responsive to the needs of the community and society they serve. While our efforts began with institutions of higher education in the United States in 1961, we have had numerous opportunities since then to work with preschool, K-12, postsecondary, and alternative education systems all over the world. Our experiences working in such diverse settings have taught us the importance of understanding and incorporating the local culture and customs into educational change.

In the past decade we have observed institutions, ranging from the traditional family to centralized ministries, in many societies throughout the world, undergoing unprecedented change and with these changes, struggling to identify new ways to respond to the needs of their members. As the Academy moves into the next decade, we look forward to applying the lessons learned from working with schools and school systems here and abroad, particularly in regards to increased parent and family participation and school-community collaboration, to design new ways in which policymakers and practitioners can become more responsive to the educational demands of the 2lst Century.

—Sharon L. Franz

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Joseph E. Slater: President Emeritus and Senior Fellow, Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies

Willard Wirtz: Partner, Friedman and Wirtz; former U.S. Secretary of Labor

Headquarters:
Academy for Educational Development, Inc.
1255 Twenty-third Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037
Telephone: (202) 862-1900
Telex: 197601 ACADED WSH
Telefax: (202) 862-1947

New York Office:
Academy for Educational Development, Inc.
100 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10011
Telephone: (212) 243-1110
Telefax: (212) 627-0407

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